

Elizabeth Smart was born in Ottawa, Canada, in 1913. She was educated at private schools in Canada and for a year at King's College, University of London. One day, while browsing in a London bookshop, she chanced upon a slim volume of poetry by George Barker - and fell passionately in love with him through the printed word. Eventually they communicated directly and, as a result of Barker's impecunious circumstances, Elizabeth Smart flew both him and his wife to the United States. Thus began one of the most extraordinary, intense and ultimately tragic love affairs of our time. They never married but Elizabeth bore George Barker four children and their relationship provided the impassioned inspiration for one of the most moving and immediate chronicles of a love affair ever written - By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept. Originally published in 1945, this remarkable book is now widely recognized as a classic work of poetic prose which, more than four decades later, has retained all of its searing poignancy, beauty and power of impact.

After the war, Elizabeth Smart supported herself and her family with journalism and advertising work. In 1963 she became literary and associate editor of *Queen* magazine but subsequently dropped out of the literary scene to live quietly in a remote part of Suffolk. Elizabeth Smart died in 1986.

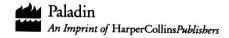
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### ELIZABETH SMART

# By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept

Foreword by Brigid Brophy



#### to Maximiliane von Upani Southwell

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## By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept

I doubt if there are more than half a dozen masterpieces of poetic prose in the world. One of them, I am convinced, is Elizabeth Smart's By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept, which was first published in 1945 – when, to the shame of those professing to practise criticism at the time, it made small stir and was left to create an underground reputation until, twenty-one years later, it has found a publisher wise enough to reissue it.

If poetic prose is the genre which can shew the fewest masterpieces, it is probably also the genre which can shew the longest list of truly and abysmally bad books – the sad, offensive litter left by writers who, in the excitement of discovering that it is unexpectedly easy to get up onto the heights, neglected to make provision for coming down again gracefully. For, as any loveletter-writer finds out, it is by no means as hard as you would guess to enrol your love, alongside that of Tristan and Isolde, among the eternal romances. The problem begins when you have to add the reminder that the money to pay the milk bill is under the vase on the sideboard.

Elizabeth Smart not merely solves the problem but turns it into artistic capital by taking the contrast between the intense and the banal as part of her actual subject. By Grand Central Station is largely about the astonishing dualism whereby a person can be a middleclass housewife and Isolde at the same time. 'I keep remembering,' says the heroine-narrator, 'that I am their host. So it is tomorrow's breakfast rather than the future's blood that dictates fatal forbearance.'

The danger to most poetic prose is that tomorrow's breakfast will intrude uninvited and thereby create bathos. In By Grand Central Station, the banal and material world is present in its own right. One great advantage this brings is that the book has no need to constitute an enclave without humour, as, for instance, Wagner's opera has to, lest a joke puncture the heroic proportions of Tristan and Isolde. Since it's firmly and irremediably in the book, the material world can be kicked sardonically about, fantasticated into a sick joke (the sentence of which I have already quoted part reads in full 'Like Macbeth, I keep remembering that I am their host') or chopped into savage hunks, as it is in the brilliant, agonizing passage where verses from The Song of Songs are spliced into the gross interrogations of a policeman.

The other great advantage is that the book can have a story. It is a genuine novel, as well as a rhapsody and a lament, though admittedly the story goes scarcely beyond the bare three lines of a love triangle, and even those have to be inferred from the narrator's rhapsodizing or lamentation over them. (I presume, for example, that it is for violating that extraordinary American law against crossing a state boundary with sexual purposes in mind that the lovers are arrested.)

Yet though the story is a narrow thread, it is a thread quite wiry enough to connect the book's moods and images. Baudelaire discovered no such thread on which to link his Little Poems in Prose, with the result that

reading them is like picking through a box of marvellous but unstrung beads. The images in *By Grand Central Station* are individually beautiful but beautiful also in the order in which they are strung. Reading the book is like saying a tragic, pagan, erotic rosary.

And indeed the book's essential manner is liturgical. It is a chant. It demands to be read aloud, to be given concert performance. Like most poetic prose in English, it belongs to the tradition of the Authorized translation of works which in the original were presumably designed for some sort of performance, *The Song of Songs*, which it quotes to such piercing purpose, and the Psalms, from one of which it adapts its title. Its insistent rhythm, like theirs, is the rhythm of a throb. The entire book is a wound. Even when its rhythm expresses the throb of pleasure, the pleasure is so ardent that it lays waste the personality which experiences it.

In keeping with its tradition, By Grand Central Station is an exotic work. Its cadences make an outlandish howl. Its imagery is the plunder of diverse rituals and myths. Some of its similes are snatched from the furnishings of Catholicism: 'her thin breasts are pitiful like Virgin Shrines that have been robbed'. Some of its personifications have stalked out of the majestic classical myths, perhaps via the fatalistic pages of the Victorian masters of poetic prose, Walter Pater and Walter Savage Landor: 'Jupiter has been with Leda, and now nothing can avert the Trojan Wars.' Sometimes the classical personification is almost blotted out by a splurge of light-metaphor: 'but can I see the light of a match while burning in the arms of the sun?' - a metaphor ignited, I would guess, by Christopher Marlowe (himself a writer who never devised threads worthy of the brilliants he

had to string, so that he remains the great poet of isolated lines and couplets – which is how one knows that those scholars must be wrong who think he wrote the works of Shakespeare).

The mastery of By Grand Central Station is, of course, a mastery of metaphor - 'of course' because the pleasure we take in literature, and perhaps in any of the arts, seems ultimately always to lie in metaphor. For a reason I do not know (it may be too fundamental to be knowable), the human mind delights less in the exact evocation of one image, however beautiful, than in the lightning-flash (very like that of wit) which compares or actually fuses and assimilates two images, in the way that the very title of Elizabeth Smart's book assimilates Grand Central Station to the rivers of Babylon. This process goes, I believe, far beyond the verbal metaphors in the sentence-to-sentence texture of writing. I am fairly sure that when we say a book has 'depth' or 'universality' we mean that the author has implied perspectives viewed down which even the book's most seemingly single and particularized images, even its characters, are metaphors of something beyond themselves.

So it is apt enough that, in plundering classical mythology, By Grand Central Station repeatedly reaches towards the big family-tree of stories which recount how one image is palpably transformed, by magic, into another. 'O lucky Daphne, motionless and green to avoid the touch of a god. Lucky Syrinx, who chose a legend instead of too much blood!' The legends of Syrinx and Daphne are among those collected by Ovid under the title Metamorphoses, a word in which the meta is the same Greek preposition, signalling an act of

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The narrator's thoughts in By Grand Central Station run on metamorphosis (she is 'offended with my own flesh which cannot metamorphose into a printshop boy with armpits like chalices'); and in this the book remarkably resembles the work of the only other supreme prose-poet of our age, Jean Genet. (The resemblance must be quite spontaneous, since the two styles were formed in societies sealed off from one another by the war: the first version of Genet's Notre-Dame des Fleurs was published in France in 1943; By Grand Central Station appeared two years later in London and tells a story set, during the opening years of the war, in North America.) There are phrases in By Grand Central Station - 'No, my advocates, my angels with sadist eyes' which might be by Genet in the excellent Frechtman translation. Like Elizabeth Smart, Genet is par excellence a metamorphic writer (one who can transform a man into a centaur in mid-sentence). Indeed, Genet, down to his very grammar, plays on the cardinal metamorphosis of 'he' into 'she'. Elizabeth Smart spins the same metaphor out of an allusion to another of Ovid's metamorphoses, the story of Hermaphroditus, the boy who went swimming and was so loved by the nymph who lived in the pool that her body fused with his and the two of them were transformed into one hermaphrodite. The reason the narrator of By Grand Central Station is offended that she cannot be transformed into a boy with (another Genet-like phrase) 'armpits like chalices' is that her lover is himself a metamorphic creature, who has fallen in love with just such a boy in a printshop; in one of the book's most inescapably memorable images, she sighs of her lover, 'Alas, I know he is the hermaphrodite whose love looks up through the appletree with a golden indeterminate face.'

Agreeing with Genet about the convertibility, the metamorphic indetermination, of the sexes, By Grand Central Station differs from him on the point of the convertibility of love and death. In Genet, the exchange runs in one direction only: pain becomes pleasure. Violence, criminality, murder itself are all metamorphosed into sexual acts; for Genet every weapon is phallic. In By Grand Central Station the exchange can go either way ('now the idea of dying violently becomes an act wrapped in attractive melancholy') but the book settles in the main for converting love and pleasure into torment. Genet is baroque and sensuous, his French tradition drawing deeper on Catholicism, his incantatory rhythms borrowed from invocations to the saints. By Grand Central Station, going back, through the English tradition, to the Authorized Version of the Old Testament, can in a just sense claim to be more Jewish. It is couched in the tone of exile, of (via Rilke) the psalmist's groan de profundis. 'Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders?' Even its martyrdoms are pre-Christian - half pagan, in fact, since they are many-eyed like Argos; and what they see with their many eyes is a vision not of heaven but of universal sorrow. Even a lover's hands inflict destruction. The phallos is always a weapon. 'I am shot with wounds which have eyes that see a world all sorrow . . . I am indeed and mortally pierced with the seeds of love.'

The myth of which By Grand Central Station most reminds me is indeed a pagan martyrdom - and one

which many Old Masters gruesomely depicted as a sort of secular counterpart to their regular subject of the Crucifixion. This story, too, is told by Ovid in the Metamorphoses; and the painters were right to pick on it as aesthetics' answer to religion, since it is openly a story about art, being concerned with a music contest. The satyr Marsyas challenges Apollo to a competition. The god wins, of course, and punishes his opponent for daring to issue the challenge by skinning him alive. The tears of the satyr's friends are metamorphosed into a river, which is how the story comes to be in Ovid's collection. Concealed in this story, I have long felt, there is a conclusion the opposite to the one it tries to force on us. The point is that Apollo's art draws no one's perpetual tears ('perpetual' because a river flows for ever). At the time of the challenge and the contest, Marsyas was indeed the inferior musician. He did not become a great artist, with the power to move his audience in perpetuity, until his skin was removed. In the words of Patricia Highsmith, 'Writers and painters have by nature little in the way of protective shells and try all their lives to remove what they have' - even submitting to being flaved alive.

By Grand Central Station is one of the most shelled, skinned, nerve-exposed books ever written. It is a cry of complete vulnerability. To see it in the image of the flayed satyr is apt to its own imagery, since a satyr, a mixture of creatures, is himself an incarnate, a frozen, metamorphosis. It is also true to the moral of the myth, since the one metamorphosis whose magic truly works in real life is that whereby a gruesome and excruciating martyrdom can be transformed into a source of eternal pleasure, a work of art.

